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NON-MANUAL TRADE UNIONISM

BY G. D. H. COLE

DURING the years from 1914 to 1920 the number of workers organized in British Trade Unions almost doubled, rising from about four and a half millions at the end of 1913 to between eight and nine millions at the end of 1920. This rapid growth of organization extended, of course, to many different trades and occupations, and was most marked, numerically speaking, among the less skilled groups of the manual workers. But, although the non-manual workers organized in Trade Unions still form only a very small proportion of the eight or nine millions referred to above, there is no section in which the growth during the past six years has been more remarkable. For the most part the non-manual workers' associations which now exist have actually come into being during this period. There were, indeed, sections of non-manual workers who were fairly strongly organized before the war. The clerks in the Post Office and on the railways had formed vigorous Trade Unions, and the Civil Service contained a number of somewhat loose associations which occasionally acted along Trade Union lines. But the National Union of Clerks, which attempted to organize clerks in all branches of industry and commerce, was very small, and the great mass of the non-manual workers were still completely untouched by organization.

During the war the tendency of Trade Unionism to extend to fresh sections of workers gradually became manifest. As prices rose the manual workers generally took measures to secure something like proportionate increases in their rates of wages. When strikes were threatened or actually took place in important industries over these questions, the Government was induced to introduce emergency legislation providing for the settlement of wages questions by arbitration or by reference to some sort of impartial tribunal, and the great mass of wage increases which were granted during the war were given, not by employers, but

either by one of the tribunals established for the purpose by Act of Parliament or directly by the Government itself. Meanwhile the non-manual workers, far more weakly organized or not organized at all, found that they were being left behind. The manual workers were securing advances; but there was little disposition to grant to the majority of the non-manual workers in industry or commerce salary increases anything like sufficient to compensate them for the fall in value of their pre-war money wages. Thus the non-manual workers found their standard of life steadily deteriorating, and this fact furnished them with a powerful incentive to follow the example of the manual workers, and to form combinations with the object of securing advances which would enable them at least to maintain their pre-war standard of life.

The circumstances, moreover, were highly favorable to combination. When the manual workers first set out to form Trade Unions and to secure the recognition of their right to bargain collectively with their employers, they had to rely entirely on their own organized strength; and in almost every case they secured recognition only after a series of failures and set-backs in which they became involved in premature strikes or lock-outs. But during the war the position was different, and the forming of associations and the putting forward of demands for increased remuneration or improved conditions of employment usually led, not to a strike, but to a reference of the dispute to arbitration or to its settlement by the intervention of a Government department. Thus non-manual workers who would, in many cases, have shrunk back before the prospect of strike action, or of becoming involved in a serious conflict with their employers, felt no such hesitancy in entering into associations with the object of getting their grievances redressed by negotiation or arbitration.

The movement towards combination among the non-manual workers naturally came to the front first among those groups which were most closely in contact with the organized manual workers in industry. For example, the foreman in an engineering shop found that men under him were securing increased remuneration which frequently brought their weekly wages above his own upstanding wage or salary. Similarly the draughtsman

in the drawing office of the same factory found that the men in the shops were earning more than he. Thus the weak Association of Engineering and Shipbuilding Draughtsmen, which already existed before the war, gained rapidly in strength until it included the great majority of the skilled men in the occupation. The foremen, confronted with a more determined resistance on the part of their employers, found it more difficult to form a stable association of their own; but numerous local societies of foremen were created, and these gradually drew together into three larger bodies, the National Foremen's Association, the Amalgamated Managers' and Foremen's Association, and the Scottish Foremen's Protective Association.

At the same time, the tendency to combination was manifesting itself very greatly among Civil Servants, who, like the non-manual workers in private employment, had to struggle hard in order to secure advances, even for the lowest paid grades, at all equivalent to the rise in the cost of living. They secured at length the creation by the Government of the Civil Service Conciliation and Arbitration Board; and the necessity of laying cases before this body undoubtedly helped to stimulate combination throughout the service. This movement towards Civil Service Trade Unionism was greatly strengthened towards the end of the war period, when the Government was at last induced, much against its will, to agree that the Whitley scheme of Joint Industrial Councils should be applied to the Civil Service and to other employees of the Government. It became necessary, under the Whitley scheme, for the Civil Service to constitute, both for the service as a whole and in each department, bodies fully representative of the staff; and the natural result of this was a big growth of combination which made most of the Civil Service grades practically a hundred per cent organized.

It was not only after the actual conclusion of hostilities that the movement towards combination began to spread at all widely among non-manual workers in private employment; but during the years from 1919 to 1920 hardly a week passed without the formation of some new association attempting to organize a group of workers for whom there had previously been no special provision. At the same time the membership of the existing associa-

tions grew rapidly, although it was still by no means as inclusive as in the case of the Civil Service or the teachers.

At the same time, organization was spreading among the technicians in industry. The Electrical Power Engineers' Association, the Society of Technical Engineers, the Architects' and Surveyors' Assistants' Professional Unions, and similar bodies, were formed and grew rapidly in strength. The Actors' Association converted itself into a Trade Union; and both it and the Variety Artists' Federation greatly increased in membership.

Where these associations, and especially those of supervisory and technical workers, came into close contact with large organized bodies of employers, it became at once manifest that these employers were most unwilling to accept the accomplished fact of organization among their salaried staffs. It was, according to the theory of the employers, permissible perhaps for wage earners to form unions and to demand the right of collective bargaining; but the relation between the employer and his salaried staff, it was urged, was and must remain a personal relation inconsistent with collective action and still more with any common action between the organized salaried workers and the ordinary wage earners. Consequently, the demands of the new associations for recognition were in almost all cases refused by the employers; and the association had to get on as best they might unrecognized by the employers, and therefore unable to negotiate, on behalf of their members, collective agreements with the big employers' associations and federations.

It is no longer possible for the associations of non-manual workers to rely for the settlement of their grievances on the method of arbitration, or on securing the intervention of a Government Department. As a number of recent cases have shown, the Ministry of Labor is now very little inclined to intervene when a dispute breaks out between a body of salaried workers and their employer or group of employers. Consequently, the non-manual workers' associations find themselves in a position closely resembling that which the manual workers' Trade Unions occupied at the earlier stages in their development. They are working for recognition; but they have no means of securing recognition except the power of their own organization.

The Trade Union movement, then, among the non-manual workers stands now at a very critical point. It has grown up under the abnormal conditions of the war period; and it is quite certain that nothing like the same rapid growth could have taken place unless these conditions had been present. It has been working largely by methods which are only applicable under these abnormal conditions; and its stability will depend on its power to adapt itself to the new conditions which confront it. When the Labor Party in 1918 came forward with its big scheme of reorganization, and attempted to reconstitute the party on the basis of an effective alliance between the "workers by hand and brain", it was clear that such a movement for a political alliance would be effective only if it found its parallel in a similar alliance in the industrial field. There is no doubt that hitherto the non-manual workers' associations, however hesitant they have been, have for the most part been tending solely towards the consolidation of an alliance with the Trade Unions of manual workers. They have not for the most part adopted a "strike policy", although a few of them have done so; but almost all of them have proclaimed that in any dispute arising in industry by which they are likely to be affected they will adopt an attitude of "neutrality", by which they mean that they will not undertake any work which would normally be done by the men who are on strike, or act in any way so as to make the success of the strike action more difficult. They will continue to do their own work in such a case; but they will do no more.

Apart from the difficult question of "neutrality", non-manual workers' associations have shown a tendency to enter into closer relationship with the manual workers by other means. A number of their associations have affiliated directly to the Trades Union Congress. The National Union of Journalists has become a constituent part of the Printing and Kindred Trades Federation. The Draughtsmen's Association has been discussing amalgamation and closer working arrangements with the Amalgamated Engineering Union and other engineering societies. Moreover, a considerable number of the non-manual workers' Unions have formed a federation of their own, the National Federation of Professional, Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Workers,

which has superseded certain smaller attempts at federation which preceded it. One of the first objects of this federation has been to work out a policy defining the relations of the non-manual workers' Trade Unions to the general Trade Union movement. The National Federation of Professional Workers is not yet a fully representative body; for a number of associations still hold aloof from it. But it is a powerful organization with about a quarter of a million members, and speaks more authoritatively than any other body on behalf of the employed non-manual workers.

Recently, fresh influences have been brought to bear upon this new and still hesitant movement. An appeal has been made by the Middle Classes Union and by other bodies for a different solidarity, resulting, not in an alliance between the manual and non-manual workers for the defense of their professional interests and for the winning of a measure of control over their industries and services, but in a semi-political organization of the whole of the middle classes, directed in theory against both the manual workers and the representatives of big business, but in practice operating largely as the auxiliary of the richer classes in the community against the manual workers. The advocates of "Middle Class Unionism" have been very active among the members of the non-manual workers' associations, and have endeavored to set up, against the idea of a union of "workers by hand and brain", the rival idea that the interests of the salary earners are threatened by the claims of what is usually called the "working class". This movement has undoubtedly caused considerable discussion inside the manual workers' associations; and a certain amount of response has been secured to the new appeal, with the result that the supporters of alliance with manual Labor and the "Middle Class" Unionists are at present contending for supremacy in many of those associations which have gone least far towards the adoption of definitely Trade Union methods.

It is easy to understand why this new appeal for "middle class" solidarity has large resources behind it, and an influential backing among the supporters of the present economic system. It is clear enough that the possibility of an alternative industrial and social order to that which now exists depends very largely on the extent to which manual and non-manual workers can

come together and coöperate in its establishment. The principal challenge to the continued existence of the present system in industry comes from the organized manual workers, and their Trade Unions in seeking a change of system, are necessarily and inevitably the principal disturbing factors in our internal situation to-day. More and more the manual workers' Trade Unions are putting forward a claim for the concession to them of an effective share in the control of industry. But it is clear that, even if the manual workers are able to a large extent to challenge the present industrial system and to insist on its modification, their power to create an alternative industrial order is greatly restricted as long as the masses of the technicians and administrative workers side with the classes to which the manual workers find themselves opposed. Manual and non-manual workers together would be capable of running the industrial machine under any system; for together they possess both the manual strength and skill which is necessary for the execution of productive tasks, and the directive and technical ability which are no less essential if work is to be efficiently done. Clearly, then, an alliance between manual and non-manual workers would present the most formidable threat to the continuance of the present industrial system; and those who are anxious that this system shall continue are therefore determined by all means in their power to prevent the consummation of such an alliance. It is undoubtedly a strong argument, from a purely material point of view, that the advocates of "Middle Class Unionism" hold in their hand. They rely on an appeal to the short-sightedness, and also to the timidity, of the employed non-manual worker.

On the other hand, the bond of professional unity, when once it has been brought into existence, is not easily severed. The non-manual workers still find their standard of life seriously threatened, and are likely in the near future to encounter even more obvious threats to it as the attempt is made to apply the reductions in wages which are forced upon the manual workers, to their non-manual colleagues. There is no chance now that the non-manual workers will find themselves exempt for any considerable time from demands for big reductions in wages and salaries. The reductions are being pressed, first, upon the organized groups of

manual workers; but it is certain that the turn of the non-manual workers will come before long.

When it comes, will the non-manual workers' associations hold together and be prepared to adopt a considerably more militant policy than has hitherto been demanded of them? Will they take the risks, usually heavier in their case than in that of the manual workers, involved in actual conflicts with their employers? These are the questions which are before all these associations at the present time. I believe the answer will depend to some extent upon the degree of unity which can be secured among the non-manual workers' associations themselves. Hitherto there has been a considerable degree of isolation, and a serious lack of common action and policy. This was doubtless inevitable in the earlier stages of a new movement which was still attempting to find its feet; but it is clear that the prospects of success for the non-manual workers' associations in the more difficult times that are coming will depend largely on their capacity to act together and to frame a common policy.

At the moment, the principal question is whether the idealism of that minority which is aiming at an efficient industrial system based on the common conduct of administration by the "workers by hand and brain", acting in close alliance and participating in control according to their various functions and capacities, will be strong enough to overcome the appeals to "middle class" solidarity on the one hand, and on the other the mere timidity and fearfulness of taking risks which characterize so many of the members of the salaried classes. No one can answer this question at the present time; but the answer to it may go far towards the determining of the future course of industrial organization in this country; for manual and non-manual workers together can, if they will, become powerful enough to do what neither can do apart, and it may be that the prospects of the coming of a democratic industrial system depend, more than upon any other single factor, upon the conclusion of a real alliance, industrial as well as political, between the "workers by hand and brain."

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